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FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN'S DECLINE IN EAST GHOUTA

By Joško Barić





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Formed in November of 2013 in Damascus governorate, Faylaq al-Rahman is one of the larger groups operating in East Ghouta representing the declining, more moderate section of Syrian rebellion. Faylaq al-Rahman was created by the merger of Liwa al-Bara (Bara Brigade) and Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (Abu Musa al-Ash'ari Brigade) under the leadership of defected Syrian Arab Army captain and leader of Liwa al-Bara Abdul Nasser Shmeir (Abu Nasr).

Disunity in Faylaq al-Rahman first appeared during the first rebel infighting in East Ghouta from April till May of 2016 when Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaysh al-Fustat (Liwa Fajr al-Umma + Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham) stormed Jaysh al-Islam's localities in western, urban part of East Ghouta which was traditionally under Faylaq al-Rahman's control. Attack on Jaysh al-Islam allowed Faylaq al-Rahman to tighten their grip over the western part of East Ghouta, however, Jaysh al-Islam expelled Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaysh al-Fustat from Douma.

This move split the East Ghouta into two zones of control which still exist today, western and more urban part is mostly under the control of Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaysh al-Fustat while Jaysh al-Islam dominates the rural east. Rebels stopped infighting due to increasing Syrian Arab Army's threat to the region, signed a ceasefire and put their differences aside for now. However, Jaysh al-Islam was betrayed by other groups and waited for the perfect opportunity to launch a counterattack giving Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaysh al-Fustat a taste of their own medicine. In April of 2017 Jaysh al-Islam struck Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaysh al-Fustat taking them by surprise in a well timed manner. To see why Jaysh al-Islam's attack was so well timed it is important to take a look at events that unfolded after the ceasefire between rebel groups.





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In October of 2016 one of the founding groups of Faylaq al-Rahman, Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari defected due to disputes between the leadership, mostly on the Faylaq al-Rahman's stance towards rebel infighting. Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari was very close to Jaysh al-Islam and therefore had a strong stance against the infighting. Even though it was rumored that the defected brigade might join Jaysh al-Islam it rather chose to create a new group Al-Wiyat al-Majd (Brigades of Glory) with headquarters in Hammouriyeh. Creation of Al-Wiyat al-Majd was even better for Jaysh al-Islam than Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari joining them, because this way they got a "satellite group" on the eastern border of Faylaq al-Rahman dominated western part of East Ghouta, if Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari just joined Jaysh al-Islam it would create a lot of unnecessary tensions between the groups at the unwanted time for Jaysh al-Islam.

Faylaq al-Rahman tried to downplay Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari's defection by saying that they only have between 150-200 fighters and that this move won't hurt Faylaq al-Rahman's manpower as they allegedly have 7000 fighters in Ghouta. Newly formed Al-Wiyat al-Majd has around 750 fighters, mainly from Liwa Abu Musa al-Ash'ari but also consists of defectors from Al-Wiyat al-Habib al-Mustafa, several retired fighters and defected officers.

Second, more bigger blow hit Faylaq al-Rahman in March of 2017 when they together with Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham spearhead rebel attack from Jobar towards Qaboun pocket aimed at lifting the siege. Jaysh al-Islam didn't participate heavily in the attack but rather just "supported it" while Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham suffered heavy casualties and grew weaker. In the failed attack on Qaboun rebels lost at least 115 fighters.





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Now that their main opponents were severely weakened all Jaysh al-Islam had to do was wait for an opportunity giving them valid excuse to attack Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham. Jaysh al-Islam didn't have to wait for long as on the 28th of April Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham stopped one of its convoys giving them an excuse to launch an attack on western areas under Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham.

Jaysh al-Islam's attack was sizeable and well prepared giving them advantage over the unaware parties and bases in Arbin, Kafr Batna and Hazeh were all attacked at the same time during the first day of infighting. Once regrouped Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham found themselves in a tough spot with a number of their checkpoints and headquarters overran by Jaysh al-Islam and several ammo & food depots captured. However, Jaysh al-Islam was met with more resistance than expected from weakened Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham resulting in the front line remaining significantly unchanged for now.

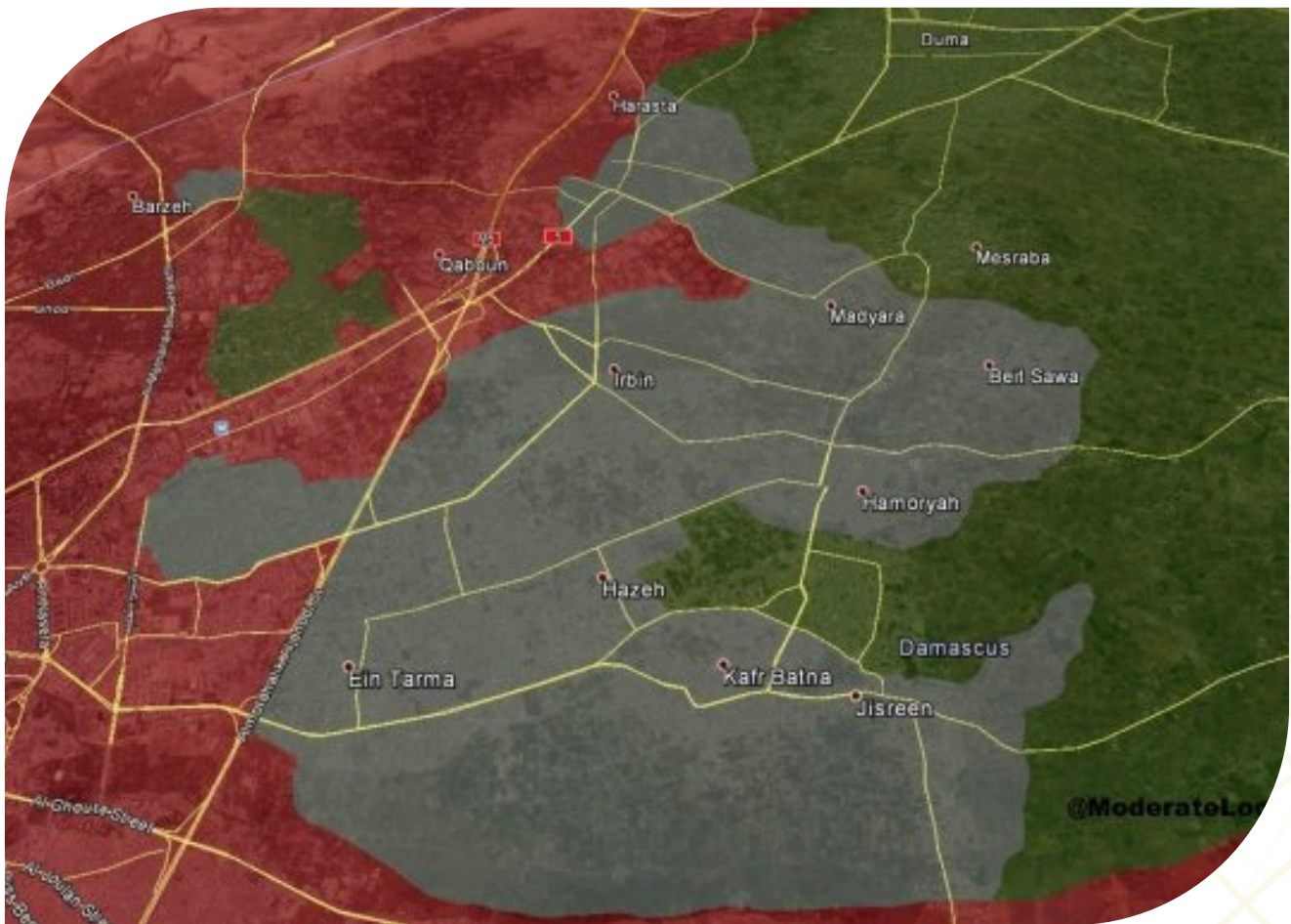
In the long run though Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham won't be able to keep up with Jaysh al-Islam and the latter should gain the upper hand, this can already be seen as Jaysh al-Islam has on 29th of April captured Aftris east of Saqba and advanced around Zemalka and Arbeen. It is obvious that weakened Faylaq al-Rahman won't be able to keep control of all of their strongholds in western part of East Ghouta if it continues to defend along such a wide front line against more numerous Jaysh al-Islam.





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If Faylaq al-Rahman continues with the same defense tactic it might lose all of its strongholds as its small garrisons will easily be picked off one by one. Best play Faylaq al-Rahman can do is withdraw to the most important core areas with higher concentration of fighters in hopes of repelling Jaysh al-Islam's attacks.



Map showing approximate control in western part of East Ghouta. Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham = grey, Jaysh al-Islam and other rebels = green and Syrian Arab Army = red





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In the end, Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham brought this on themselves by trying to opportunistically diminish Jaysh al-Islam's influence in East Ghouta and now the latter might diminish their influence in Ghouta for good. If Jaysh al-Islam manages to overcome Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham it will be one step closer to a dream shared by all East Ghouta based groups, complete control over East Ghouta. In case of a hypothetical victory over its adversaries Jaysh al-Islam will only have smaller groups in their way which will either join its ranks or face the same fate as Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham.

However, is the fighting over economically endangered and shrinking pocket worth it, in the long run rebels are only weakening themselves and making it easier for Syrian Arab Army to eventually capture it



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